

Outline

Unit 1 Title

Introduction: Visual Art Inspired by Music

Unit Structure

Approximately 45 minute lesson delivered by classroom teacher exploring Unit 1 Classroom Lesson on the website

Student Objectives

By the end of this unit students should

- Listen to/observe a wide variety of musical and visual art examples
- Describe/articulate responses to music and art examples
- Identify elements in music and art such as mood, style and speed
- Draw specific parallels between music and art examples

Lesson Strategies

On the Unit 1 Classroom Lesson page of the website, play each musical example while simultaneously displaying its corresponding visual art example. Students should be listening and looking at the same time. Play each example for approximately 30-60 seconds.

Pose and discuss the following questions

- Does the music 'look' like the art? How?
- Does the art 'sound' like the music? How?
- How does each art example convey the mood, style and speed of the music and the sound of the instruments?

Materials Needed

Workbook and writing utensil optional if written (rather than oral) responses are preferred

In Detail

This first lesson is meant as an introduction into the world of music and painting. All of the paintings on this page have a connection to music. Some were inspired by a style of music, some by a specific piece. The goal of this lesson is to get the students to start thinking about how music can inspire art and how art can sound like music. Let them brainstorm and hypothesize about what the connections might be. I purposely intended this class for you to do on your own before the first videoconference so that you and the students can explore, think freely, and form your own ideas with an open mind. These examples are sophisticated, but I am always amazed that even the youngest students have very strong intuitive feelings about music and art.

That said, here is some background info, links to other articles, and a few of my own thoughts on the relationship between these works of art and music, which you can use to guide the conversation. Before you read this, I urge you to look at the paintings while listening to the music and form your own impressions first. I'm not an art historian; these are my personal reflections, presented here only as food for thought. There is no right or wrong when reacting to music and art! We each bring our own unique experience to the table. Encourage your students to be introspective, brainstorm and think outside the box. When listening to the musical examples, it's not obligatory to listen to completion (some of the examples are lengthy) but listen to as much as you can to get a good sense of the piece, and encourage your students to listen to the rest in their own time.

Example 1

In 1911, painter Wassily Kandinsky heard a concert that featured composer Arnold Schoenberg's *Three Piano Pieces*. That night he went home and immediately sketched Impressions III. Kandinsky and Schoenberg were each exploring parallel concepts in their respective genres -- moving away from traditional forms of harmony and painting into more abstract sound and colour worlds. In this painting the large black blob looks like a piano and one can roughly make out the shapes of the audience. Schoenberg's early compositions are very romantic and "easy" to listen to. The three piano pieces are on the cusp of a new style, but to me they still have much of the warmth and expression of the old style, albeit with a different, more modern combination of notes, (listen especially to the very beginning of the first piece). Similarly if you [look at early paintings by Kandinsky](#) that were very realistic depictions of nature and later ones that are completely abstract, this painting is smack in the middle. One can vaguely recognize the piano lid, and the silhouettes of people. They are still there, but are slowly changing form, deconstructed by colour, shape, and gesture. Both the music and the painting are transitioning from "traditional" to "abstract."

Example 2

American painter [Stuart Davis](#) considered jazz to be the "musical counterpart to abstract art" and [was especially inspired by the jazz pianists Earl Hines and Fats Waller](#). *Swing Landscape* practically jumps with jazz with its bright colours and shapes, which suggest city buildings and instruments. The colour and shapes are overlapping, much like instruments in the jazz band, which rarely play in complete unison but are constantly

playing off of one another. Jazz also uses a lot of syncopation (notes that don't fall on the beat but in direct opposition to the beat). To me, the diagonal lines in the painting have the same rhythmic effect visually, and the bold colours evoke the sound world of an upbeat, brassy jazz band.

Example 3

English painter John Christie was inspired by a composition for orchestra called *San Francisco Polyphony* by Hungarian composer Gyorgy Ligeti. [Polyphony is defined](#) as “a style of musical composition employing two or more simultaneous but relatively independent melodic lines. [Ligeti described this piece](#) as “the interplay between chaos and organization and likened it to throwing a lot of things into a drawer.” In an interview Ligeti said, “You know my flat in Hamburg: it appears to be tidy, but there is chaos in the drawers” (*Three Questions for 65 Composers by Balint Andras Varga*). In this painting, what I find striking is that though the piece is made up of seemingly random squiggly lines and shapes, looking at it from a distance, it is the most basic shape of all – a square. I think the shape of the square is equivalent to the overall timing of the music – at 13 or so minutes from start to finish, this is the outer shape of the piece. Inside you hear all the same kinds of squiggly lines and shapes. Notice how different instruments will stand out and suddenly catch your ear, much like in the painting a line or dot will suddenly catch your eye.

Example 4

German composer Felix Mendelssohn wrote eight volumes of what he called “Songs without Words.” Each volume contained six songs. It's not clear whether Lord Leighton painted this work in response to the Mendelssohn works or whether he just agreed to title his painting *Song without Words* afterwards in an implicit nod to a common sensibility between the two works. In any case, what I found interesting about looking at the painting while listening to the songs is how the character of each song changed the way I interpreted what the girl was thinking and feeling. I purposely included two different songs in the playlist, so you can ask the students as well if each song changes the way they view the painting. Play an excerpt from each song with the painting on the screen and ask the students to imagine (and share) the girl's thoughts and feelings. Encourage them to listen for the differences in mood.

Example 5

Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* evokes the grid pattern of New York City streets, blinking lights, traffic, city hustle... The title alludes to the jazz style known as boogie woogie. Characteristics of boogie woogie are a consistent shuffling rhythm with frequent exuberant interjections from brass instruments. To me this painting feels like it is in motion, and the larger squares of colour remind me of the brass interjections (or the honking of car horns?)

Example 6

In addition to being a painter, Georges Braque was a trained classical musician and Johann S. Bach was his favourite composer. Though this work pays homage to Bach's works in general and is not a specific composition, it seemed right to pair this with a

fugue. Bach is famous for his fugues. A fugue is a musical form, similar to a round (like Row Row Row your boat) but more complex. When the melody is introduced in a round, it is repeated exactly in the same way in the other voices. In a fugue however, once the melody is introduced, it will be then presented in different ways by the other voices: higher, lower, upside down, inverted, in fragments, and accompanied by other notes and “bridge” material. Listen to the g minor fugue. The melody (the fugal subject) is the first 9 notes, then the same melody appears in the next voice in a lower register for 9 notes, then the 3rd statement appears in a higher register for 9 notes (and then has a few extra notes at the end). A fugue is musical architecture, a layering of melodies on top of one another, side by side, in pieces (much like this cubist painting?).

Example 7

Last year I took up painting as a hobby and I made this painting that I call *C Major scale*. It literally shows how I practice my scales. I associate certain notes of the scale with colours; on the first line you see C D E F G A B C, the second line are the same notes, descending C B A G F E D C. When I practice my scales I set the metronome to 60 (a metronome keeps a steady beat out loud, at 60, it beats 60 beats per second). The vertical yellow lines represent the metronome. First I do the scale 4 beats to a note, (on the first and second line, each colour takes up four beats). Then I get faster and faster: 2 beats to a note, 1 beat, $\frac{1}{2}$ a beat, etc, so the colours get smaller and smaller. When I finished painting all the colours, I went from left to right and did a whooshing sweep with the brush – this was to signify my right hand – the hand that holds the bow. When I practice my scales I’m not only thinking about the notes with the left hand, but I’m also thinking about how my right hand glides my bow across the string to make a beautiful sound.

Example 8

This is a computer animation of another piece by Johann S. Bach, the concerto for oboe and violin. In this example, I’d like the students to start thinking more specifically about how certain aspects of music are represented visually. For instance, how does this artist visualize the passage of time (from left to right)? Notice how notes of short durations are represented with diamonds, while notes that have longer durations and are more lyrical are lines. How is pitch and register represented? (Vertically, higher notes are higher on the screen, lower notes are lower.) Each instrument has its own line and colour. Do the colours sound like the instruments? Does anyone think a different colour would have better suited the violin or the oboe, other than red (violin) and purple (oboe)? How are rests (silences) represented (when the violin doesn’t play at the beginning, the red line is there but faint)? Does watching the video help you hear the music differently? How does it change the experience to listen with your eyes closed?

Example 9

This is both a graphic animation and a new composition; both were created simultaneously. One can pose similar questions as the above example. How does time pass (also left to right)? Similarly, pitch is also mostly vertical. In this example, shapes represent musical gestures, and different shapes have different sounds (like the boing! of the opening circle)